

The Bonds of Womanhood: "Woman's Sphere" in New England, 1780-1835

ISSN 0003-4827

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Recommended Citation

"The Bonds of Womanhood: "Woman's Sphere" in New England, 1780-1835." *The Annals of Iowa* 44 (1978), 406-407.

Available at: <https://doi.org/10.17077/0003-4827.8567>

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women failed to enter in significant numbers the nation's medical schools and internship programs.

In spite of increased female participation in the medical profession following the renewed struggle for women's rights in the early 1960s, Walsh concludes her study with a note of caution. She argues that the recent progress could be reversed as easily as that of the nineteenth century's. Stressing that "sexual discrimination is deeply embedded in the fabric of American medicine," Walsh exhorts women physicians to "recognize the debt they owe to the feminist movement." Only through a strong and politically active women's movement can the recent progress be made secure.

Walsh's book, of course, is not without its flaws. Due in large part to the breadth of the time period covered, *"Doctors Wanted"* suffers from an unevenness in its presentation. The first half of the book, the section covering the nineteenth century, is a tight unit. Upon its conclusion the reader feels left with an understanding of aspiring female medical practitioners and their quest for acceptance in the regular medical community. The second half of Walsh's study, however, does not display such cohesiveness. Walsh's treatment of the twentieth century, with her shifts in focus from the national to the local scene, is somewhat diffuse. As a result, it leaves the reader with a sense, but not necessarily an understanding, of women, medicine, and the American medical establishment.

This reservation aside, *"Doctors Wanted: No Women Need Apply"* is an important contribution to our understanding of the American past. Well researched and well written, this study provides solid information about the experiences of an emergent professional group. Anyone interested in the evolution of medical education, women in the professions, and the quest for male-female equity can benefit from a careful reading of this book.

—Patricia Mooney Melvin
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The Bonds of Womanhood: "Woman's Sphere" in New England, 1780-1835,
by Nancy F. Cott. New Haven: Yale University Press, 1977. pp. 237.
\$12.50.

Nancy F. Cott tells us that she began *The Bonds of Womanhood* as a study of the social derivation of the concept of womanhood. What she ends up with is an in-depth report from the silent majority of women who endorsed the cult of domesticity in New England from 1785 to 1835.

Rather than relying on the didactic literature and feminist tracts that dot the 1830's, Cott's focal period, she studies hundreds of women's unpublished diaries and letters and scores of ministers' sermons that were written over the fifty-year period between the American Revolution and the 1830's.

As the economy shifted during this period from an agricultural and household-production base to a commercial and then incipiently industrial

base, women's place within society changed. Cott views the change from women being participants in home manufacture to women becoming manufacturers of the home from five different but intricately related angles: work, domesticity, education, religion, and sisterhood. She uses the personal records of private, middle-class women, especially, to trace the evolution of a doctrine that gave women a gender-determined "sphere," the home. The diarists and letter-writers reveal that as their duties became more and more restricted to child-bearing and homemaking, their perceptions of their roles became increasingly elevated. They view their homes as sanctuaries, retreats, refuges that were necessary for their men who had to deal with the outside, that is, the real world.

Sermons by various ministers further document the emergence of the cult of domesticity. Ministers encouraged women to view themselves not only as the providers of men's sanctuaries but also as the guardians of the faith. Women's finer sensibilities were to enable them to respond to religion naturally and thereby equip them for their work in forming or preserving moral character in those around them.

The sermons' help support Cott's contention that the literature of domesticity promulgated a Janus-faced conception of women's roles. The one face, gazing to the past, saw women in their traditionally subordinate, inferior place. The other face, gazing to the future, saw them as agents of morality capable not only of preserving the purity of the family but also effecting the salvation of the nation.

Cott has no quibble with feminists—then or now—who object to the existence of a separate woman's sphere. She covers the origins of feminism in so far as the social and economic conditions that gave rise to the cult of domesticity simultaneously foster feminism. She gives ample attention to this paradox. In her chapter on education, for instance, she points out that advocates of education for women argued that well-educated women would become mothers better able to fulfill their "natural" mission and provide the state with virtuous citizens. But opponents contended that advanced education would lead women to look beyond their domestic sphere. As Cott points out, the opponents guessed correctly. Education, as well as new conditions in the work world and attitudes in religion, gave rise to feminism.

But the real merit of Cott's book lies in her ability to present the obverse side of feminism. By piling document upon document, she quietly but insistently overwhelms the reader with the conviction that the majority of New England women living between 1785 and 1830 did in fact embrace the idea that their homes were their special sphere and their position God-given and natural. Their identity was established and their self-worth maintained by the evolution of an elaborate yet relativistic ideology of womanhood.

The Bonds of Womanhood is a slim book, the text running some 206 pages. Seven additional pages list the women's documents and sermons consulted. A final list, that of the secondary sources Cott so amply footnotes, would have been helpful.

—Grace O'Neill Hovet
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